

GILBERT SIMMONS

Interviewer: Carl

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Place: Gilbert Simmons' house

Transcriber: Priscilla Simmons



Gilbert Simmons was born on November 25, 1949, and has always lived in Friendship. He is a lobster fisherman and a boat builder in the off-season. He and his wife Sharon have two children, Jason and Ellen, and one grandchild. When he is not working, he enjoys hunting and playing.

Q: What is the name of your business?

A: Simmons Boat Works, Incorporated.

Q: Where are you located?

A: 11 Bayberry Drive, Friendship, Maine.

Q: When did you start building boats?

A: Approximately 1984.

Q: How long have you been in business?

A: Approximately since 1983, but I was working for others before that, doing this on the side.

Q: Who taught you how to build boats?

A: A lot of it is self-learned and what my father taught me.

Q: Why did you choose this job?

A: Because there was a lot of work--an endless supply of work. It's pretty much custom work. It takes a lot of knowledge.

Q: Why did you choose to locate your business in Friendship?

A: Because I was born and raised in Friendship, and it's my little niche.

Q: What do you do?

A: Basically, we buy fiberglass hulls from another supplier. There are dozens of them up and down the Maine coast. Usually someone has approached me to do a completion; we take a hull, and usually we need everything from the engine to the hull. It takes about three months on an average boat. Some of the hulls are larger; some of the systems differ.

Q: How many employees are there in your business?

A: Depends on how much work I've taken--anywhere from one to three that help me. If my son works for me, he'll be one of the crew, and I'll hire a helper for him.

Q: What kind of training and skills are necessary?

A: Basically, carpentry skills come in handy. There isn't much in a boat that is really square; everything is curved. Pretty much a lot of it is by eye, how it looks good. Of course, on the hull, a lot of times we use a lot of molded decking that's pretty well tied to another's design. In the past I may have had a little more freedom in the shape of things.

Q: Do you have to have any special license for your work? If so, explain.

A: Not to my knowledge. I believe if you build above a certain size vessel--I forget how large it is--you may need to be certified.

Q: What kind of equipment or tools do you use?

A: Pretty much everything you can imagine. Fiberglass doesn't require too many tools; we use scissors, bubble rollers, paint rollers, utility knives, etc. It depends on what kind of construction we're doing. We're not using very much wood at all--it's all foam composites of balsa. We use saws, drills, etc.

Q: How many customers do you serve?

A: I do two or three boats in the winter. I only run the shop about six to seven months. For example, this year we have three scheduled. I'll probably be looking at for at least three helpers this year.

Q: How many hours do you work a day? What days do you have off?

A: We pretty much work Monday through Friday. If we're behind, I work a half-day Saturday. We work eight or nine hour days, sometimes longer.

Q: Describe a typical work day from beginning to end.

A: Well, we start around 7 a.m. Hopefully, the furnace has been running all night so it's nice and warm in here. Any fabrication we're going to do, we try to lay out things, make a plan for the afternoon. The morning is really getting ready for the afternoon. We try to just do fiberglassing in the afternoon. Fiberglass is pretty nasty--fumes; it stinks. If we're doing something large, we always plan it for the afternoon, so at quitting time we're out of the shop.

Q: Is there a particular time of year when people order boats?

A: Usually I specialize in lobster boats. I've done one pleasure boat, and I really don't want any more. They take too long. It's a different customer. Lobster boats I've done a lot of. Typically you have to plan several months ahead because you can't build the boat until you have the hull. The decision has to be made several months ahead, depending on what the lay up schedule is for the hull. You have to plan several months ahead--five to six months. For example, this year I've had two hulls in the shop in there now since May and June. Because of the lay up schedule, it could take longer. The ideal time to start building would be November. Because they're always booked up, these guys took the hulls early. So these guys made their decision close to a year in advance.

Q: What is the busiest time of day or year for you?

A: Well, we usually start sometime in December, and I'm out of the shop, hopefully, in June. We're very busy in that six or seven month period. I also lobster fish in the

summer, pretty much July to November now. Now I pretty much have all my gear up.

Q: What do you like the most about your job?

A: Do you mean lobstering or boat building?

Q: Boat building.

A: The day I start because you know it's going to take you three months to complete the project. And it's not easy; there's a lot of hydraulics, wiring, fiberglassing, ordering the materials in. We're always waiting for someone.

Q: If you could change anything about your business, what would that be?

A: Change. . . I don't like change. Probably less fiberglass, which is impossible to do when building a fiberglass boat.

Q: What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in Friendship?

A: Advantage. . . you could pretty much do what I do anywhere. An advantage would be I work within walking distance of my shop. I built my house across the road. Disadvantage. . . tractor trailers are paranoid about me building on a dead-end road.

Q: Describe some memorable experiences related to your work?

A: I'd have to think about that.

Q: How has your business changed over the years?

A: Well, the biggest change is in the cost of the boat itself. It used to be you could pretty much put the whole thing together and launch it--basic lobster boats were \$50,000 or \$60,000. Pretty much the same boat now would be \$150,000 or \$160,000 because the price of raw materials has escalated out of control. A 35- or 36-foot lobster boat, which used to be the popular size everyone was looking for, would be \$50,000 or \$60,000. I built one last year for about \$160,000--there were a few more electronics. It used to be maybe \$1000 to \$1500 would buy electronics. Now you can easily pay \$10,000 for electronics. Radars, plotters, you name it--putting in all the



bells and whistles. We've done a couple of the larger boats, 40's and 42's. They go for about \$240,000. The engines used to be \$15,000, and now the average price is probably close to \$35,000 or \$40,000. Prices are through the roof on most everything.

Q: Do you advertise, or do people find out about you by word-of-mouth?

A: By word-of-mouth. I do not advertise. I have more work than I can possibly handle. Usually people see your work, and you're really advertising. If you do a bad job --especially in the lobster fishing business--it spreads like wildfire. You do not want any problems. Your advertising is really your quality of work.

Q: How do you price your boats?

A: It's very difficult. It used to be pretty much material and labor. It would change maybe a couple percent a year. But the last two years, I'd almost have to tell you that it'd cost what it'd cost. I could tell you what the last boat like it cost and know it's going to be more than that. For example, last year the price of resin went from \$500 to \$600 a drum, and there's about six in a boat. That's just as example. Everything is energy-driven. The price of oil goes up, all my fiberglass products go up.

Q: How long does it take to build a boat?

A: Usually about three months. Some of the larger boats may take four months. It really depends on how much help I need in the shop.

Q: What is the biggest boat you've ever built?

A: A 42-foot H and H with a 580-horse engine. It cost about \$240,000. It's in Vinalhaven.

Q: What is H and H?

A: It's the supplier of the hull. H and H Marine.

Q: What do you like most?

A: I actually know what that is: when they pay me.

Q: What is the smallest boat you've ever built?

A: The smallest boat I've done is a 30-foot Young Brothers for a guy in Waldoboro.

Q: Do you ever keep a boat yourself? What one or ones?

A: I usually keep my own personal boat a year or two, depending on how much other work I take. The last boat I had I kept two years. I replaced mine last January. Before that I kept one about nine years, which is a record. I took so much other work that I couldn't replace it. Just didn't have the time.

Q: What was the longest time it took you to build a boat?

A: Probably it's my own boat because a lot of times I work alone. I work weekends, too. Three months is what I try to pull it off in. The longer it goes, the more it costs; for some reason I can't control it. Time comes into the factor--the quicker you can do it, the less it costs.

Q: What is the quickest time to build a boat?

A: We've done it in less than two months. It was a basic lobster boat.

Q: What is the strangest order for a boat you've ever gotten?

A: And completed, or not taken the job?

Q: It's up to you.

A: The strangest probably would be a tuna fishing boat with a center console with a big walk-around that is not common to this area--nothing like a lobster boat.

Q: Is building a boat ever dangerous? For example, fiberglass or epoxies?

A: Well, you all know fiberglass is pretty nasty. There's kind of an art to grinding. I have three or four shop vacuums to keep the dust out, keep the dust all cleaned up. Grind away from yourself--kind of like cutting with a knife. We usually wear respirators. We should wear a dust mask all the time. A lot of times with little stuff, you don't bother. We try pretty hard to wear dust masks and respirators.

Q: Have you ever gotten hurt building a boat?

A: All the time, daily. Bumps and bruises.

Q: How many boats have you built?

A: I forget. Approximately in the low 30's.

Q: How do you feel when you are finished building a fine boat?

A: Launching is great. Personal satisfaction if it looks good and everything goes good. I try to stay low key. There's a lot of pride for anyone who does it. We have a 42-foot boat on the mooring in front of my house that I'm getting ready to take to Vinalhaven.

Q: Can you describe a memorable experience?

A: When you launch a boat for the Vinalhaven boys, they want to turn the key and head for the island. It's really hard to hold them back. My neighbor has a little 12-inch cannon. There were 10 of us standing in the boat. And while I was checking the boat over, he touched his cannon off. Everyone about had a heart attack. Something you don't forget, I guess.